More Nixon Radio

President Prefers It Over TV, Likes the Selective Audience

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President Nixon, perhaps the most innovative user of the mass media in American political history, has found a novel way in the television era to get his message to the public.

It is called radio.

In the mass-audience epoch of TV, in which pre-emption of popular prime time shows has become among the deadliest of politicians' sins, Mr. Nixon has turned increasingly to the old and neglected mainstay of Fred Allen, Jack Benny and Lamont Cranston. (If you don't know, ask your father).

In both his presidential campaigns of 1968 and 1972, and occasionally in his first White House term, Mr. Nixon used radio for some of his more thoughtful and philosophical conversations with the voters. But TV remained the prime medium.

Now, however, the word from White House speechwriters is that the President plans to make radio talks an integral part of his communications arsenal. In a series of supplemental State of the Union messages he is to send to Congress in the weeks ahead, the plan is for him to explain them to the public on radio.

Why radio?

The question is one that opposition politicians, and newsmen covering the Nixon White House, have been asking each other for a long time. If the President can get free prime TV time just about anytime he asks for it, why bother with radio?

According to White House speechwriters who have discussed the matter with the President, have written radio speeches for him and have encouraged him to do more of them, the reasons are these:

• Mr. Nixon likes to make radio talks better than he

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likes going on television. They require less preparation on his part, less time, less electronic paraphernalia, no makeup.

• They are easier for him. One advance read-through sometimes is enough; he doesn't have to worry about facial expressions or gestures with his hands, or the heaviness of his celebrated beard, or his tendency to perspire, especially under heavy lights. And he can wear his reading glasses, which he never does on TV. He can concentrate on the test and not have to look up repeatedly.

• He does better on radio, or so he and those around him believe. He has a good radio voice and he can adopt a low-key style. Those around him recall surveys taken after Mr. Nixon's 1960 TV-radio debates with then Sen. John F. Kennedy that those who heard but didn't see him thought he had won.

• The audience is more selective, and hence likely to be more attentive. To those who argue that TV audiences are larger, the President reminds them that radio listeners "are the people who tuned in," rather than nightly TV watchers who suddenly were confronted by a speech pre-empting their favorite program.

• Radio for that very reason is less an intrusion on the desires and habits of the public, and less likely to be an irritant that could create a negative reaction to what thhe President has to say. "It takes something urgent to knock off 'I Love Lucy,'" says Raymond Price, until recently the chief Nixon speechwriter.

• By its nature, radio demands less of the audience and hence reaches an audience that TV often misses—the commuter driving to or from work, or the housewife busy preparing lunch for her children. Nixon radio speeches occasionally have been aired at noon on weekdays.

• Radio is more conducive to the thoughtful discussion of issues. "It doesn't grab you by the lapels and say, 'This is a national emergency,' the way TV does," says William Safire, another of the Nixon speechwriters, "and that's a good thing for the President to have. He can say to the people, 'If you are interested, tune in and we'll talk.'"

• There is less risk of over exposure on radio. "You don't want to wear out your welcome," says Price, "and with TV you can get the public 'up' too often. Television is such a dominating medium in people's lives."

• The audience is not insignificant—in fact, much larger than even the Nixon people believe, if network research is accurate. Nixon speechwriters say "up to ten million" listen to radio; the radio networks' RADAR (Radios All Dimension Audience Research) survey for the spring, 1972, said 85.4 per cent of all Americans age 18 and over listen an average of four hours, 10 minutes each weekday. An average of 30,643,000 listen around noontime, 15,587,000 on a Sunday night about 6 o'clock.

• Radio for a politician really is not so much an alternative to television as it is an alternative to giving a rally or dinner speech, where the audience is several thousand at most. And on radio he doesn't have to worry about applause lines, nor does a President have to risk crowds or go great distances. "Don't sneeze at several million people," the President has told his speechwriters. "Have you ever seen that many in an audience?"

• Radio is a proven way to get featured play from the writing press—really a prime objective, the speechwriters say. A presidential position paper handed to the press gets short shrift, says Safire, "but by the action of a President passing a paper through his lips, it gives it a wholly different character."

• Radio is vastly cheaper than TV. According to Norman Ginzberg of CBS Radio in New York, the President's Jan. 28 budget speech on radio would have cost him as a candidate $3900 for 10 minutes. Half an hour on a TV network, Safire says, would cost about $90,000.

Ever since the days of Franklin D. Roosevelt's "fireside chats" on radio, Mr. Nixon has been partial to that medium, his speechwriters say. In the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House, the President has pointed to the fireside at which FDR spoke and told some of them: "We'll have to do one here some day."

In the 1968 campaign, Mr. Nixon turned to radio heavily in the closing two weeks, delivering radio talks on 14 straight nights. The main reason, the speechwriters who were with him then admit, was the press' complaint that he was not dealing with issues in any depth, but was simply trying to hold onto his narrowing lead over then Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey.

Though the radio talks were Mr. Nixon's most thoughtful efforts of the campaign, they drew little attention at the time, primarily because Mr. Nixon was campaigning actively at the same time. The writing press focused on him personally, and on the drama of Humphrey closing the gap, and they dismissed the taped radio talks with a few paragraphs.

What particularly irritated Nixonites later on, Price says, was the charge by some that Mr. Nixon intentionally sought to slip serious discussion of the issues past the public, and hence turned to radio. If that had been the objective, he says, Mr. Nixon would not have given the talks at all.

Earlier in the 1968 campaign, when candidate Nixon planned to make what was expected at the time to be his most important public statement of that campaign—his speech on what to do in Vietnam in late March—he bought radio time, not TV.

But fate intervened; President Lyndon B. Johnson chose the same night to go on TV to talk about Vietnam—and to withdraw from the 1968 race—and Mr. Nixon canceled his radio talk. After that, he decided he didn't have to spell out his Vietnam position.

Throughout the first term,

new Nixon speechwriters were always hearing about the "radio series" the President was going to do—easy conversations with the American people. But he never did it. Issues warranting the use of TV kept cropping up.

In the 1972 campaign, though, with the President choosing to stay off the campaign trail until the very last days, the press was looking for anything from the Nixon camp to provide balance to the frenetic McGovern campaign.

To the experienced Nixon campaign team and the speechwriters, radoi was the answer. When he spoke on radio, and did not compete with himself on the hustings, the press treated the radio talks as major news—which they were, coming from an otherwise insulated President.

As always with the Nixon media operation, refinements have been added. Now, when the President goes on radio, the network TV cameras are permitted to tape Mr. Nixon reading a selected portion of his talk—at most a minute or 90 seconds—for use on TV news shows later.

Significantly, they don't get to cover the whole speech—just the portion the White House thinks is most advantageous to the President. The White House retains what one speechwriter calls "the element of control"—the ingredient more than any other that has come to be the trademark of Mr. Nixon's media relations.